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Assessing harm from spying case

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WASHINGTON — The alleged spy ring of the Walker family might have provided the Soviet Union with clues on how to get at the U.S. Navy's most precious secret: the location of its nuclear-missile submarines.

Intelligence experts say the government might never be able to determine exactly how much damage has been done, although Pentagon spokesman Michael Burch said yesterday that Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger now believed that it was "even more serious" than he thought last week, when he said the United States suffered "a serious loss."

Pentagon officials refuse to discuss the case in detail for fear of giving even more information to the Soviets. But three former top intelligence officials agreed in interviews that the Soviets might have obtained important pieces to a puzzle that, when completed, would allow them to find and track the submarines that carry two-thirds of America's strategic warheads.

"The Walker ring may have provided the Russians with information to track our submarines with some precision," said George Carver, who served in top CIA posts from 1966 to 1976. "It could be the most damaging case since the Rosenbergs gave away the secret of the atomic bomb."

Carver was referring to Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were executed in 1953, after a celebrated spy trial.

Two former CIA directors, Stansfield Turner and William Colby, agreed that the most severe threat from the Walker case, in which four men have been charged with espionage, might be to the security of the nation's nuclear strategic submarine force, long considered invulnerable.

Turner, a former admiral who was CIA director under President Jimmy Carter, said that he did not think that the Soviets had the capability to detect U.S. submarines now but that the alleged spy ring might have helped them toward that goal.

"The danger," Turner said "is that they might ... over a period of time ... get to a point where they would

be able to tell where our submarines are. They don't have it now, but they may have gotten some clues."

All the experts emphasized the importance of the strategic submarine

fleet in the nation's defense posture.

U.S. strategic nuclear forces are divided into a "triad" — land-based missiles, strategic bombers and submarine-launched missiles — that would retaliate against the Soviet Union if the United States were attacked. These are the forces that the nation relies on to deter war.

Of those, only submarines have been considered invulnerable to attack from the Soviet Union. Land-based Minuteman missiles could be struck by the Soviets because their underground silos are large, stationary and can be located easily from photo-reconnaissance satellites. Bombers are even more vulnerable because they are large and their air bases are easy to locate.

"Strategic submarines are the most important part of our deterrent," Turner said.

All three of the former CIA officials agreed that the most damaging information supplied to the Soviets

might have concerned U.S. communications with the submarines.

They pointed out that three of the four arrested in the case had special access to communications techniques and special clearances involving submarine communications.

John A. Walker Jr., 47, the alleged ringleader, was a radioman with top-secret security clearance at Atlantic Fleet Headquarters in Norfolk, Va., in 1975 and 1976, according to the FBI.

His older brother, Arthur, 50, also charged, taught anti-submarine warfare at an Atlantic Fleet special school in the early 1970s.

Jerry A. Whitworth, 45, arrested in Davis, Calif., was a communications specialist at the Naval Telecommunications Center, at the Alameda Naval Air Station, near Oakland, Calif., from 1979 to 1982.

Michael Lance Walker, 22, seaman son of John Walker, was arrested aboard the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz.

Law enforcement sources also identified a mysterious fifth suspect — dubbed "F" in correspondence seized by the FBI — as Navy technician Gary Walker, 24, the half-brother of John Walker and Arthur Walker. But the sources said Gary Walker has been cleared of involvement in the spy operation.

The three former CIA officials said the Soviets could have learned enough from the alleged Walker ring to piece together patterns of how U.S. communications operate. The Soviets might also have gained clues to what the U.S. knows about Soviet communications.

Colby, CIA director under President Gerald R. Ford, said, "It's an incremental thing. For them, it's a jig-saw puzzle with a piece here and a piece there that they may be able to fit together into a pattern."

With the information, the Soviets might be able to deduce how orders

are given to American submarines, what their patterns of operation are and how they communicate with headquarters.

From that information, Carver said, they might have a start on where to look to locate submarines. "They may, over a period of time have been able to focus their analytical efforts to see how we work," he said.

A specific example of how information provided by the alleged Walker ring might have helped the Soviets in seeking out U.S. submarines was provided by Barry Blechman, an author of major studies of naval operations for the independent Brookings Institution and a former analyst for the Center of Naval Analysis, a think-tank.

Blechman said that a major problem in managing nuclear submarines has been communications because it is difficult to send messages through water. As a result, he said,

strategic submarines, trailing a special antenna, must come close to the surface to communicate.

"It would be helpful for the Russians to know exactly how often it is necessary for these submarines to rise close to the surface to communicate and how deep they might have to be, what techniques are used," he said. "They may have been able to get this kind of information from the Walker ring, we don't know."

Blechman said, however, that he was personally convinced that technical problems facing the Soviets in trying to locate U.S. submarines are so complex that it is doubtful that the Soviets would be able to solve them before the end of the century.

"I think our submarines are likely to be safe into the year 2000," he said, even though he agreed that the Soviets may have gotten clues to solve the puzzle from the Walker ring.